



# SENATOR RUNNER'S WEEK IN REVIEW

A WEEKLY REVIEW THAT WILL KEEP YOU INFORMED AND UP-TO-DATE



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## A Bridge To Nowhere

Transportation has always been at the heart of American culture and an example of our country's best efforts. The Transcontinental Railroad, the Interstate Highway System, the Brooklyn Bridge, and the Golden Gate Bridge are a testament to what can be achieved through American ingenuity. But, recently Bay Area politicians, bickering for more than a decade over the design and financing of the long-delayed new San Francisco-Oakland Bay Bridge, have provided an even better example of ineffective government blocking restoration of a badly needed part of California's transportation system. Their dithering will cost ALL California taxpayers more than double what the system should.

Meanwhile, the unveiling of the 1.6 mile Millau Viaduct in France last year was quite an eye-opener. And, frankly, an embarrassment. The French bridge took three years to build and cost less than half a billion dollars. Contrast that with the going estimates for completion of the new eastern span of the Bay Bridge (from Alameda to Yerba Buena Island), which fall between \$5.1 and \$5.9 billion, depending on who you ask, and you can't help but shake your head. Hundreds of millions of your tax dollars have already been spent on the project, with little to show for it. What is it going to take to get this done?

It was an Act of God that first exposed the deficiencies of the current bridge. The 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake sent a large segment of the upper deck crashing into the lower, killing a young woman and badly injuring her passenger. While the bridge remained intact and was repaired in a matter of weeks, experts soon concluded that another major earthquake on the nearby Hayward fault would result in severe damage to the existing bridge due to the fact that part of the 10-lane span rests on archaic timber pilings sunk into the bay's deep mud.

The state spent no less than *seven* years studying retrofit options before then-Governor Pete Wilson decided in 1997 that building a new eastern span would be safer and less expensive to maintain. A similarly massive construction project had been completed in record time in California not long before. In the aftermath of the 1994 Northridge earthquake, Wilson had used his Executive authority to suspend statutes and labor rules to allow around-the-clock repair of Southern California's ravaged freeways. He also established incentives for the private companies doing the

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repairs with bonuses if they finished ahead of schedule and penalties if their work was completed after the deadline. The result: work that would have taken two-and-a-half years by the bureaucratic book took only 64 days.

But, when the Wilson Administration recommended a simple, \$1.52 billion skyway as an answer for the eastern span of the Bay Bridge, the real trouble began. The proposed span was roundly criticized by Bay Area politicians and newspaper editors as too “ugly.” They demanded a “signature bridge” and an “architectural asset,” one that was harmonious with the Golden Gate Bridge.

Some officials, like former San Francisco Mayor Willie Brown, were also preoccupied with the bridge’s impact on their development plans for Yerba Buena and Treasure Islands, leading to protracted wrangling over the bridge’s precise route. Advocates pushing for the inclusion of bike lanes managed to prolong the debate for an inordinately long time, especially considering that the western span (from Yerba Buena Island to San Francisco) would remain unchanged.

The Bay Area ultimately opted for a single-tower suspension bridge design they feel is aesthetically worthy of the region, a decision that is largely responsible for the \$2.5 billion in recently disclosed cost increases. A critical question now is how much of the \$5 billion-plus project cost should fall on ALL state taxpayers.

Governor Schwarzenegger and others have recently advocated foregoing the single-tower suspension design for a simple, no-frills concrete viaduct. If a scaled down span can be constructed more quickly and cost-efficiently, it must be seriously considered for the best interest of the public. Especially if it includes the potential for additional lanes of traffic, something the single-tower design does not.

According to the U.S. Geological Survey, there is a 70 percent chance that a 6.7 or greater magnitude earthquake will hit the Bay Area in the next 30 years. Mercifully, California has so far been spared this catastrophe, but the fact that it hasn’t happened yet should not deter us from our responsibility to provide the citizens who depend on making the journey across the bay every day with a safe and reliable bridge. They have certainly waited long enough: Children born in 1989, the year the Loma Prieta quake uncovered the Bay Bridge’s vulnerabilities, are getting their drivers’ licenses this year!

As one of the nation’s busiest toll spans, crossed by 280,000 motorists every day, there is no question that the Bay Bridge is a significant piece of the state’s highway system and absolutely vital to the local and state economies. Facilitating the expeditious travel of commuters, tourists, and commercial traffic and ensuring their safety is a state responsibility. But, state taxpayers should not be on the hook for cost increases attributable to the Bay Area’s artistic sensibilities or for the price of adding costly and unnecessary bike lanes. If taxpayers are going to pick up the tab, their best interests should be given top priority. That means pursuing function over form – fast.

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